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by: Daniel E. Mullins
Extension Horticultural Agent
Santa Rosa County

“Spring Gardening Tips”

Gardening is in full swing along the Gulf Coast. Although many new projects are taken on by gardeners in the spring, don't forget to provide regular maintenance to already established landscape plants. Following are some tips:

- Remove leaf cover from the lawn before the first mowing. This can be done by bagging, blowing or raking. Recycle leaves on your property by using them as mulch in the vegetable, flower or shrub bed and by composting.

- Service the lawn mower according to the manufacturer's recommendations. This includes sharpening the blade and setting it at the correct mowing height for your kind of grass. Centipedegrass should be mowed at 1 ½ to 2 inches in height and St. Augustine is mowed at 3 to 4 inches. Some of the newer dwarf varieties of St. Augustine can be mowed slightly lower. Sharpen the blade after every third mowing.

- Inspect cold sensitive plants and prune out dead and damaged parts. Subtropicals and tropicals will need some attention right away, as new growth has already started in some areas. Some of the more susceptible species to check include Mexican heather, Lantana, Hibiscus, Pentas, Fatsia and Oleander.

- It is time to plant warm season vegetables and annual flowers. Watch garden centers and nurseries for the arrival of new shipments. Indications are that there will be a greater selection than ever before. Look for some of the new tropical perennials and ornamental grasses, as well as the standard summer bedding plants.

Be thorough when preparing beds for the planting of flowers and vegetables.

Spade or till thoroughly to a depth of six to eight inches while incorporating a generous quantity of organic amendments such as manure, peat or compost. The success of spring plantings is often directly related to bed preparation.

■ Fertilize lawn and shrub plantings. The key word here is “lightly.” Overfertilization can bring on many problems including burned plants, excessive growth and potential water pollution.

Typical lawn and garden fertilizers, depending upon the analysis, should not be applied at more than six or seven pounds per one thousand square feet. This is equivalent to 25 to 50 pounds for an average sized suburban lawn and landscape.

■ Any heavy pruning of azaleas that is necessary should be done between the time that they have finished flowering and mid-June.

■ Watch for the heavy infestations of aphids or “plant lice” on tender spring growth of roses, pyracantha and other shrubs and flowers. Check with your garden center or Extension Service for recommended control measures, if needed.

Question of the Week: While moving compost to my garden I noticed many strange looking creatures with many legs that were evidently living there. What are they and is the compost safe to use?

Answer: There are three different species of critters with many legs that would enjoy a compost pile. Millipedes, centipedes and pillbugs thrive in a moist, highly organic environment such as this. They rarely, if ever, feed upon living plants so use the compost.